

Summary

A WRETCHED LIFE OR A JOURNEY TO WEALTH

Adaptation of immigrants from Savo, North Karelia and Kainuu to Canada in 1918–1930

In the period 1918–1930 a total of 4 743 immigrants moved from Savo, North Karelia and Kainuu to Canada. The move across the ocean from eastern Finland was less common than from Ostrobothnia because people from eastern Finland preferred moving to Finnish cities. On the average, 55 percent of those leaving the province of Kuopio were men; the corresponding figure in the province of Mikkeli was 62 percent and in Kainuu 65%.

More than half of the emigrants were 20–29 years of age, or young adults who had just entered the prime of their working lives. Over two-thirds were unmarried, which considering their age was rather logical. By social background they were chiefly farmers (or their children) or workers. Due to the structure of industry there were more workers among the emigrants in eastern Finland than elsewhere in the country (tenant farming as an institution was less developed there than in the west).

Emigration in the province of Kuopio centered on the town of Kuopio, but proportionally its significance was greatest in Hankasalmi, the area surrounding Kuopio, Lapinlahti, Iisalmi and environs, Kiuruvesi and Tuusniemi. Trans-Atlantic migration was extremely rare in North Karelia. In the province of Mikkeli emigration was centered in Kangasniemi, the rural parish of Mikkeli and Pieksämäki. Three-quarters of the migrants from Kainuu were from the town of Kajaani, Sotkamo and Kuhmoniemi.

In general, I have discovered 401 persons from eastern Finland whose occupation is listed. The countryside called to men, the towns were the women's preserve. Approximately nine percent of the migrants from eastern Finland were farmers. Only less than one-third of the former farmers took up this occupation. The decision to obtain a piece of land demanded a certain determination to remain in Canada. Families were more willing to make this decision. Many had sought the basic capital for farming by means of emigration in Finland and not in Canada.

Tarmola was the base in Canada for farmers from Varpaisjärvi. It was situated inside Gorham, in Thunder Bay. The land was extremely rocky. The first settlers arrived in 1910. In general, the farmers lived their lives in wretchedness: building their own home and acquiring land were the main purposes of life. Becoming a farmer was influenced by the example of

relatives and friends. In the 1920s those who had shifted to agriculture had to be satisfied with the role of smallholder since large amounts of land were not available. The majority of the smallholders were forced to engage in outside occupations to guarantee their income and in this case the forest had a decisive importance, which had also been the case on smallholdings in eastern Finland. Hunting and fishing were only the main occupation in eastern Finland in exceptional cases, but were very popular hobbies.

In total, fourteen percent of Eastern Finns worked in forest-related occupations (but a quarter of those from Kainuu). The majority were just lumberjacks, but the group also included contractors, sawmill owners and workers as well as supervisory personnel. The bulk of the recruited employees were products of working class or farmer families. The typical forestry worker was a 25-year-old man from the countryside who sought work in the forests of northern Ontario. The forests of Quebec were also quite popular among people from Kainuu. Workers often made the rounds of many logging camps during winter, even in different provinces. In summer many forest workers could be found in nearby towns.

Women from eastern Finland also worked in the logging camps as cooks and domestics. The work was hard but the pay was high. During the Depression the immigrant forestry workers faced severe circumstances. Forestry had great importance as the main source of livelihood. In general, suitable work was sought to provide for one's old age. Single men can be described as having lived the so-called life of agony and bitterness. Life was an unstructured journey from one logging camp to the next. Single men could not speak the language of the country and were wrapped up in themselves. This often led to alcohol abuse.

Eighteen percent of those from Kainuu worked in the mines (the average for eastern Finland was six). In going to the mines they opted for the example of relatives and friends. Compared to the average immigrant occupations, mine workers were very highly paid. Miners usually lived in boarding houses (except of course those who had families). The work was dangerous, accidents occurred almost daily. Miners were also susceptible to occupational diseases, for example, tuberculosis. The most desirable mining work was carpentry on the surface, which was also well-paid and of course posed no danger compared to normal mining activity. The most despised job, and given most to recently arrived immigrants was hauling slag underground. The work was badly paid, dirty and ran the risk of cave-ins.

Successful miners lived their own life in misery and adapted. They were proud of their skill. The most unsuccessful lived lives of agony and bitterness. They lived from hand to mouth waiting fatalistically for an accident or lung disease.

Eight percent of Eastern Finns were involved in construction work. Many also remained in these trades and sought to maintain their positions by

specialization. The most common occupation was carpenter. During the Depression they worked on massive construction projects such as hydro-electric plants. Otherwise, construction workers wanted to work in small groups, preferably composed of Finns. Some of the builders moved to cities such as Toronto, where there were Finnish girls working as domestics; establishing a family was easier there than at some shifting work site.

The bulk of Finnish construction workers were originally farmers or their sons. Maintaining a farm also required woodworking skills. Those creating their own construction firms could succeed well, especially in the boom period following the Second World War. Finding work in the cities was more difficult at first, but once it was found, keeping the job was fairly certain. If the immigrant could speak English, he could get a permanent job.

Some of the carpenters who got permanent jobs because of their specialization lived a harmonious life. Except for the Depression years, everything was in order. They also had families. Those who had no continuity in their lives had to adapt to living in misery.

The first jobs for women were usually in service occupations. In Canada women chiefly earned their living in the large cities like Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg and Vancouver as well as in the Finnish centers. In total, 45 percent of Eastern Finns sought such jobs. In other words, the majority of single women came to Canada as servants; the group also included some men working as truck drivers and butlers. Only eighteen percent of the people from Kainuu were servants. This was a result of the bulk of Kainuu women coming along with their husbands, and therefore they did not have their own occupations. In leaving Finland only one-fifth of the women from the province of Kuopio and one-tenth of those from eastern Finland stated their occupations as domestic servant. They entered service, not because they wanted to, but since no other gainful employment was available to women.

Many Eastern Finnish women were involved in so-called gradual migration, or they moved first to the nearest town and from there across the Atlantic. The most popular stops were Vyborg and Helsinki. In general domestics came from farm families. Learning to be servants required no special skills, they learned on the job and many had learned the fundamentals of home economics in their childhood homes. They gave up their jobs when they got married. In truth, married couples could be in service in the same family. For example, the woman could be a maid and the husband a chauffeur.

Many Eastern Finnish girls got service jobs through the Finnish Immigrant Home in Montreal. It also helped if the servant wanted to change jobs, as was often the case. Very few enjoyed working at the same place for several years. In addition to families Eastern Finnish women also worked at various institutions (hospitals) and companies (inns).

Girls in service ate and lived at their workplaces; in this way they were able to use their wages for other purposes. Domestic workers were not, however, given pensions. They were only free one night per week and every second Sunday. Canada also had no law to regulate the length of the domestic's work-day, so the day could extend to even sixteen hours. Furthermore, the work was hard, there was no privacy nor was the work valued. In addition, it was difficult to start a family. On the other hand, the family generally took care of the girl, if she, for example, got sick.

The life-course of the women was dependent on their husband's circumstances. The majority of immigrant women from eastern Finland got married in due course – in fact, somewhat later than their counterparts in Finland. If the domestic servant remained unmarried, she did not consider herself unlucky. Some of these women represented the “I'm doing well, maybe even too well” type. They only wanted to describe their positive experiences. They got involved with hobbies and spent their retirement years in “Suomi Homes for the Aged.” Some of them may have possessed a yearning for their former homeland, but could not express it openly since this would have been an admission that all was not well in Canada.

Activities in the field of business and capital among Finns were less common than among other nationalities. Such activity was based on the needs of the Finns, who looked for a place to sleep, eat and go to sauna. Of the immigrants from eastern Finland, 12–15 percent were members of the business and civil servant class. The bulk of them had to be satisfied with the wage-earner role since they did not have the necessary capital.

In total, only three percent of the migrants became entrepreneurs. Almost all of these individuals already had prior experience in this work in Finland. The group also included women who owned saunas, cafes and boarding houses.

In general, the businesses owned by Eastern Finns were rather small and labor-intensive. They employed their owner and possibly also their family, rather infrequently outsiders. The businesses were almost without exception located in towns. Only forestry contractors operated in the countryside. The life of the entrepreneur was varied and eventful. They valued their own work and considered owning their own home a self-evident fact.

Eight percent of the migrants from eastern Finland were craftsmen. The number of those migrating from the towns was significantly higher than those from the countryside. The majority of them had already been seamstresses, tailor and shoemakers in Finland.

In total, eighteen percent of the Eastern Finns who worked in Canada were not categorized by occupation. Most of them were day laborers. This is no surprise since one-third of the migrants from the area had working class backgrounds. The day laborers shifted more easily into a range of occupations, that is they changed jobs according to need. Since Finns mainly wound up at the bottom of the work hierarchy, their salaries were commensurate with their level. In good years enough was saved to buy a

house and perhaps a car or a farm. In bad times, it was tough enough to put food on the table. The life of the itinerant worker was casual and day laborers in particular changed jobs regularly and had no protection against unemployment or pension security.

Generally, the work of the immigrants was by nature such that it was contingent on rising and falling trends, in which the short-term need for labor varied markedly. With the dawn of the Great Depression in 1930 the traditional immigrant occupations did not suffer very much, but people who became unemployed in other fields took jobs from the immigrants. The highest rate of unemployment was among the recently arrived, who had not been able to find a permanent job. For example, of those Eastern Finns who had become unemployed, more than half had moved to Canada in 1929 or 1930.

The unemployment problem was solved by either voluntarily moving back to Finland or alternatively to Soviet Karelia or simply getting through the Depression by craftiness, for instance, by living on one's wife's wages or hunting or other forms of natural economy.

The greatest risk of Eastern Finns becoming unemployed occurred in the mining industry. The construction trades were also strongly dependent on economic trends and winter, when there was a slack season at construction sites, was a cause of temporary unemployment. Unemployment in forestry was almost entirely seasonal. In truth, however, there was also permanent unemployment in forestry during the Great Depression. In contrast, entrepreneurs and farmers had easier times getting through the it. There was self-sufficiency in the small-scale production of staple commodities, and their incomes were not as dependent on the markets as were those of the farmers on the prairies. The basic capital of the entrepreneurs came from savings, so their businesses did not fail as a result of bank loans. Servants were relatively rarely laid off during the Depression. Evidently, the families employing these people managed through the Depression with few financial losses.

Unemployment was also considered to be a shameful matter, and the subject not broached in interviews and biographies. The unemployed only became visible if they attracted the attention of the authorities in seeking relief or through organization. Some were trapped in Canada, not having the means to return to Finland, and having one's passage to Finland paid by the Consulate was seen by the immigrants as a disgrace. Nor did immigrants want to return home poorer than when they left.

Work determined place of residence. Despite their preferences, immigrants had been forced to relocate in search of jobs, which largely determined their living environment. A total of 875 cases mention the place of residence of Eastern Finns in Canada in the 1920s–30s. In the Maritime Provinces, or Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, there were three men, and they quickly moved on to Quebec. The population in the Maritimes was more homogeneous and conservative by nature than residents of somewhat more inland Canada. Nor was there land available for immigrants to buy.

At least 36 percent of the people from eastern Finland lived temporarily in Quebec. The majority of them later moved elsewhere, mainly to Ontario. Quebec, with its massive logging camps and piece work, was particularly favored by people from Kainuu. Most of the Eastern Finns in the province were women; there were plenty of jobs for maids available in Montreal. Generally, settling in Montreal sooner or later required a commitment to the Finnish associations. Membership brought with it a feeling of belonging and perhaps also psychological support against the dominant French-speaking population. On the other hand, it also prevented assimilation into the dominant culture.

Good education could guarantee Finns a job commensurate with their skills, especially in technical fields. This, however, demanded the ability to speak French. One of the most important factors attracting people to Montreal in the late 1920s was the establishment of the Finnish Immigrant Home, which provided jobs, social connections and also financial assistance in case of illness.

57 percent of all migrants from the eastern provinces moved to Ontario. This basically corresponds to the Finnish average, but is clearly greater than among other nationalities. The majority of women were maids or seamstresses. The majority of men were farmers or lumberjacks. The most popular of center for servants was Toronto. Tarmola, nearby present-day Thunder Bay (or the former twin cities of Fort William and Port Arthur), was comprised of an Eastern Finnish agricultural community whose residents primarily came from Varpaisjärvi. People from Kainuu settled in great numbers in the mining area of Sudbury, where they could also work in the forests.

Ontario saw the concentration of Finns into various places, which differed from other provinces. Outside Ontario, only Montreal had a substantial Eastern Finnish population. In contrast, masses of people from eastern Finland lived in Toronto, Port Arthur, Fort William, Sudbury and the regions surrounding them. It was exceptionally notable that farmers banded together to form organizations and common economic enterprises such as cooperative dairies.

The Prairie Provinces, or Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, did not attract very many Eastern Finns. Most of them were attracted by the mines (for example, The Pas or Flin Flon). In addition, there were women working as domestics in Winnipeg. Large-scale agriculture, however, did not interest people from eastern Finland (land was no longer available and, on the other hand, the migrants had been used to small farms).

The Eastern Finnish population of British Columbia was four percent, or clearly smaller than Finns in general, but about the same percentage as all immigrants on the average. The long journey deterred some of the migrants. Those moving to British Columbia were older, and they sought permanent occupations. There was no real possibility of returning home. Many committed themselves economically by investing in a fishing vessel or a farm. Eastern Finns migrated to the West Coast through the other

provinces. The most popular place of residence was Vancouver, where, in particular, they went to retire.

In general, a return to eastern Finland was rare after the First World War; in fact, those migrating in the 1920s never returned. I have located 47 Eastern Finns who returned permanently. Seven of them were deported and ten returned after retiring. If we attempt to compare remigration to the total emigration, it was truly minimal. Men returned intermittently; jobs and marriage prevented women from returning. The most common age for returning was 25–40. Remigration commonly occurred within five years of emigration. Married persons returned more often than single persons (some men returned to their families). In contrast, if the entire family had migrated together, a return was extremely rare. No marked regional differences arise in respect to remigration. The majority returned to their home districts as farmers. There were, however, a relatively large number of Eastern Finns who returned home after retiring. They usually had no families or were widows. A few Eastern Finns were deported; the reasons were either mental health problems or criminality.

Those returning to Finland temporarily (a total of fifteen in the sample) were in all cases younger than the permanent remigrants. They also comprised more married couples and the proportion of women was in fact greater. Furthermore, the sample contains those (13) who originally wanted only to visit their former homeland and then return to Canada. The reason was usually a nostalgia brought on by age.

Of the prevailing theories of immigration, the emigration of people from eastern Finland to Canada in the 1920s appears to follow closest the so-called core-periphery model. A strong growth center attracted immigrants seeking social mobility. Many of the migrants were unskilled workers. It was difficult for them to rise in the work hierarchy, where the highest level was dominated by those speaking English. For the majority, the intent was to return to the “periphery,” or Finland. Emigration, upon departure, was perceived as a temporary condition and the goal was to support their families in Finland through their earnings.

Finns from eastern Finland stated the reason for their move to be the higher standard of living in Canada in comparison to Finland. Had they thought the standard of living to be the same in both countries, the decision to emigrate would hardly have been made, even though transportation links would have improved. An exception are the so-called adventurers, whose primary motive was to experience something new. The standard of living they achieved in Canada was different from what they had expected to achieve in leaving Finland, when making their decision to emigrate. Some few did, however, achieve their “dream” of wealth, most made out adequately, but others suffered miserably, especially in the early 1930s.

Above all, Eastern Finnish immigrants adapted, or acclimated, themselves to their new homeland relatively well. On the other hand, acculturation, or

assimilation, was normally only possible for the second generation. The ability to adapt was also put to the test since the immigrants had to be ready to move many times during their work careers. In Finland, farmers, in particular, were able to remain on their farms from one generation to the next. Nor did the working class usually move anywhere further than the next parish.

Younger immigrants were prepared to even move about in Canada at a rapid pace. Mobility decreased when the immigrant started a family. At the same time he wanted a permanent job, to guarantee his family its livelihood. Family men, for example, sought to acquire a farm or work in the mines so their jobs would generally remain in the same area for a longer period of time than was the case in the building trades or forestry. Craftsmen and entrepreneurs, too, often had families.

With age the significance of social relationships also increased. A person felt secure when living among other Finns, who could provide at least an element of security in times of need. The other side of the coin was the citizenship question. Citizenship was often sought at a more advanced age specifically because the individual believed that as citizens they received better social welfare and pension benefits than as Finns. Applying for citizenship also meant the final abandonment of the idea of returning to Finland. In fact, some who had changed their citizenship did, however, return to Finland to spend their retirement.

The greatest difference between Eastern Finns and other emigrants from Finland could, however, be that the threshold for leaving the country was higher; the threshold for remigrating was also higher than, for example, Ostrobothnians. Their settling in Quebec were also exceptional, even though the surrounding community did not welcome them with open arms. People from eastern Finland also seem to have possessed a stronger desire to integrate into the surrounding community and were more willing to go to language courses and even learn French more than other Finns.

The proportion of Eastern Finnish settlement in Canada, as in fact that of all Finns, was on the whole extremely minimal. Occasionally, however, they were conspicuous. They were in the vanguard when the cooperative movement was established in Canada. They were able to form their own agricultural communities, even through the strength of one parish. They established functioning churches and, to balance them, local trade unions. They were also capable of breaking new ground where others had lost their hope.

Translated by Roy Goldblatt